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ABSTRACT

Earlier practices in the teaching of literature offered one standard of success and one method of lesson delivery for everyone. This did not make it possible for students to reach their individual potentials. The resulting idea of attending to the individual formed the basis for ability grouping. However, placement into lower groups resulted in seriously limiting, rather than enhancing, opportunities to learn and it was discovered that assignment to an ability group predicts educational and social outcomes with alarming accuracy. Flexible grouping is a system of temporary grouping that can better answer student needs. Each student reads and writes in groups with classmates, but the members of the groups will continually change. This system insures in part that low-achieving students will engage in a greater variety of intellectually stimulating activities and be exposed to a greater variety of literature. It enables all students to achieve without creating an "at-risk" group. Students will have an opportunity to work in each type of group: read/listen; shared/support; and partner/collaborative. Skill and strategy development can be accomplished with flexible grouping. This system of grouping will enable teachers to help all their students reach their full academic potential. (Contains four references.) (CR)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF AT-RISK LEARNERS IN THE LITERATURE-BASED CLASSROOM

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In the novel, The Townsman, by Pearl Buck, Jonathan Goodliffe, a young man from England, had a dream of becoming an English school-master. It seemed that his dream would not be realized when he was uprooted by his father and moved with his family to make their fortune in Kansas, which was at that time a territory of the United States. The small frontier community where they settled did not even have a school, but Jonathan was not a man to give up his dream easily. Because he was quite a determined and enterprising young man, he decided to found a school in the sod hut where he lived. It was a subscription school with the tuition being paid in goods, rather than in cash. The tuition might be food, clothing, of even buffalo chips for heating, which was always a great concern on the often cold, wind-swept plains. Like many educators before and since, Jonathan was teaching for enjoyment and satisfaction, rather than adequate remuneration. The school was an unusual because it included African-American, Native-American, and European-American students. At that time, just after the Civil War, there were strong objections to the integration of the school. Because Jonathan was determined to allow all of the children in the community to attend school, and because it was the only school

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for hundreds of miles around, the school was integrated. Although integrated, it was not multi-cultural. In fact, everyone was expected to learn what was viewed at that time as essential for an educated person, according to the European ideal. In addition, as was typical of schools at that time, in order to be promoted to the next level, each person had to learn a certain body of information. There were no accommodations made for learners with special needs. There was one method of lesson delivery and one standard of success for all of the students.

I shared this story with you for many reasons. One is to illustrate the power of literature. This story made an impression on me. It communicated many ideas to me. The ideas have not left me even though many years have passed since I first read this book. Bernice Cullinan said that "Literature is the window and mirror of the soul." (p.3) It is a window because we can come to understand the world through it and a mirror because we can come to understand ourselves through it. That is its power!

Another reason that I related the story is because it gives us a historical perspective. At one time, there was one standard of success and one method of lesson delivery for everyone. Then we began to realize that we were not making it possible for everyone to reach his/her full potential. We decided that we had to create a way to do this. Instead of "weeding-out" those who could not meet our one standard, we began to focus on helping them to learn as much as possible. It is likely that this idea of attending to the individual was the inspiration for ability

grouping. As the each student worked with others who were achieving at the same level, he/she would have an opportunity to learn using appropriate material. In addition, the teacher would be able to plan lessons using appropriate techniques as well as being able to vary the pace to meet the similar needs of the students in the group. However, we did not realize at that time that this would not be a panacea, but would result in some undesirable consequences. First, the attitude in schools toward ability groups is similar to the Catholic church's view of marriage, i.e. once a student is placed in a group, he/she is in that group throughout his/her educational career. Even though students might have progressed to the point that they could have functioned in higher-level groups, they were not moved to those groups. As a result they fell further and further behind the other groups until there may have been a point that they could not have functioned in those faster-moving, higher-achieving groups. In addition, we provided different types of experiences for the lower groups. There was a focus on low-level skills to the exclusion of enriching experiences that the students might have had. For example, reading comprehension was not enhanced fully because students in lower-level groups were asked only "who, what or where" questions as they were engaged in a discussion about their reading. They were not asked to analyze, synthesize, or evaluate. As a result they may not have fully understood what they were reading. In addition, their thinking processes were not stimulated. The result of placement in lower

groups was that opportunities to learn were seriously limited, rather than enhanced.

In addition, we discovered that assignment to an ability group predicts educational and social outcomes with alarming accuracy! According to Allington and Walmsley (1991), most children placed in high-achieving groups remain in those groups and go on to college. Most children placed in low-achieving groups remain there and are far more likely to: "leave school before graduating, fail a grade, be placed in special education, become a teen-age parent, commit a juvenile criminal offense, to remain less than fully literate." (p.2). Yet is possible that children can become fully literate (McGill-Frazen & Allington, 1991) when given appropriate experiences.

It is likely that membership in the ability group itself does not fully explain some of these results. However, when the relationship between group membership and social as well as educational outcomes is so strong, we must examine the issue of ability grouping and devise an alternate plan. Flexible grouping is just such a plan. Flexible grouping is a system of temporary grouping. Each student reads and writes in groups with classmates, but the members of the groups will continually change. At times each student reads and writes independently. This system insures in part that low-achieving students will engage in a great variety of intellectually stimulating activities, rather than just low-level skill and drill. It also insures that students will be exposed to a greater variety of literature. In

addition, the students of differing abilities have an opportunity to interact. Often, when we speak of helping the low-achieving student to reach his/her full potential, the concern is raised of whether we are also helping the on-grade-level and gifted students to achieve their full potential. Or, are we holding them back? The system of flexible grouping enables all students to achieve. It does not create a new "at-risk" group, i.e. the on-grade-level and gifted students are not be prevented from growing.

During any reading class where flexible grouping is used, a student is a member of the read/listen along group, shared/supported group, or partner/collaborative group. Or he/she may read independently. At some time each student works in one of those ways. Group membership changes from time to time and everyone has an opportunity to read independently.

In the read/listen group, the students may listen to a tape of a story or listen to someone read to them as they follow along in a book. The benefit of this activity to the low-achieving group is that they are exposed to the ideas, grammar, and vocabulary of pieces of literature that they cannot yet read. They will also be exposed to fluent reading, so that they can hear the beauty of the language. This type of activity is of particular benefit to the English-as-a-Second-Language student. The on-grade-level and the gifted students will enjoy listening to the tapes. They may even be asked to prepare some of the tapes. The benefit to them in this activity is that their understanding of a

piece of literature will be enhanced as they receive instruction and engage in preparing the tapes. They have an opportunity to use the pitch and tones of their voices to express the feelings of the characters. This activity helps them to focus on the an important aspect of reading comprehension, the connections among the characters, the plot, and the setting.

The students in the shared and supported groups engage with the literature in another way. The shared and supported groups are used at different times during the day or perhaps on different days. They are described here together because as teaching/learning strategies they share many commonalities. The commonalities are because in both the teacher uses the Directed-Reading-Thinking Activity. In both the shared and supported groups the teacher engages the students in pre-reading activities in order to establish a background of information and to set purposes for reading. For example, in "Strega Nona" by Tomie dePaola, the teachers could ask the students to state everything that they know about witches. This is an appropriate pre-reading activity because the main character in the story is a witch. He/She could write the information in a list. Then in the shared reading group the teacher would read the story to the students. In the supported reading group, the students would read silently. In both groups the teachers would stop at various intervals in the story and engage the students in discussions about the story. Finally, when the story was read, the teacher would engage the students in a post-reading activity. In the case of

"Strega Nona", the students could be asked to tell what they had learned about witches. At times any student in the class would be a member of either of these groups. The benefit to all is that they are engaged in the reading process with the teacher as a facilitator.

The partner/collaboration groups gives students the opportunity to work together in pairs or with small groups. Partners might read silently. One member of the pair orally summarizes and the other makes suggestions about the summary. And so they proceed through a chapter, taking turns summarizing and making suggestions. In small collaborative groups, two groups might work together. Both could read a page or more silently. Then one group could question the other. Next, they would switch roles. The students are engaged with the literature without the presence of the teacher. They direct the discussions. Instead of waiting for direction, they take the initiative and practice being independent, active learners.

Those students reading independently have the opportunity to select books that interest them. They have a chance to read at their own pace for enjoyment and to get information. The self-selection aspect of the independent reading is very motivating. In addition, there is a strong positive relationship between time-on-task and achievement (Slavin,1994). In order for students to be able to locate material they can read independently, three crates of books can be kept. Each crate would contain books at different reading levels. At times students simply read

the books. At other times, students respond in journals to the books that they have read independently.

Another option for grouping is the "interest group". The teacher first describes several books. Multiple copies of each book must be available. Each set of books is placed in a different location in the room. The children are free to choose which book they will read. After each group reads independently, they engage in a discussion about the book. The teacher may give them a few questions to discuss, such as, "What was your favorite part and why?" or "What was the most exciting part?" The students are motivated by the self-selection and are directing their own learning.

At some time the teacher may decide that he/she wants all of the students to be engaged with the same piece of literature. First, they will all participate in the pre-reading activity. For example, with the book "No One is Going to Nashville", which has as its theme a family conflict and how the family solves the problem, the students might write about a conflict in their families and how they solved it. Then they would engage with the book in a variety of ways. Some of the students would listen to a tape, some would read with the teacher, others would read with a partner, and individuals would read independently. Then they would engage in various post reading activities with heterogeneous cooperative groups. They might use literature circles to discuss the book. Then they could write about a school problem and how they would solve it. Their compositions could be pre-

sented to the other groups by either reading or giving a talk or a dramatic presentation. They will experience the beautiful language, the vocabulary and the ideas. They will all be engaged in the reading process. They will stimulate each other intellectually.

Skill and strategy development can also be accomplished with flexible grouping. As the students are engaged in various literacy activities, the teacher can take notes about areas where they might profit from individual attention. For example, he/she examines daily notes and notices that several students in the fourth grade, who have been reading "Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes", are having difficulty with figurative language. With this particular book, the difficulty can significantly interfere with comprehension because it replete with figurative language. This is the time to form a small, temporary group of those students and to work with them on figurative language. When they show that they have a grasp of techniques for understanding figurative language, then the group is disbanded. The students then have the opportunity to use their new skills and strategies to continue to read the selection. Suppose that the teacher through examination of daily notes notices that every time a certain five students reads a piece that requires visualizing, they have difficulty with comprehension. Those five students could be engaged with a book that will give the teacher many opportunities to help develop the comprehension strategy of visualizing. The book "No One Is Going to Nashville" contains

many opportunities for this type of instruction. The teacher forms a supported reading group with the students needing the help. Just before the students read a passage where the father is talking on the telephone to someone from the S.P.C.A. about a stray dog his little girl has found, the teacher uses modeling to suggest a strategy. He/She tells the students that they will read about the conversation that the father has, but that they will only be able to read just what the father says. In order to understand, the students should stop after each thing the father says and imagine what the person at the S.P.C.A. is saying. Immediately after the strategy is described, the students read the passage and have an opportunity to practice the new strategy. In this case, the students are engaged with a piece of literature so that they will have a opportunity to develop a metacognitive strategy that will help them with reading comprehension.

Many instructional strategies that teachers already know as well as any new ones can be incorporated into flexible grouping systems. The guiding principle of the system is that members will be together for a time, and then the group will be disbanded. Each person will have an opportunity to work in each type of group. Each person will read material on his/her level or another level with and without the teacher. Each student will have the opportunity to interact with all of his/her classmates. Each student will engage in a variety of stimulating activities. Perhaps with this system of grouping as a part of our instructional plan, we will be able to help all of the students in our

classrooms reach their full academic potential and experience all of the good things that our society has to offer.

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